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Competitive advantage

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Chicago



"Green" and "technology" are more than just buzzwords for Geoffrey Kasselmann, SIOR, founder of Op2mize; they're the foundations of his four-year-old business, and the keys to its success.

"People are doing a lot sustainability stuff, but when you achieve LEED certification it's only a time-stamp for that building," he says. "To continue to be sustainable over the life of the building, that includes monitoring, maintaining, controlling, which is why you also need to have a smart building."

Building fundamentals will always be the cornerstone of real estate, Kasselmann says, but making a building sustainable using technology to help keep it that way will give the building an edge over its competition in the long run. Op2mize's trademarked "Sustainable Intelligence" is also giving the two-person company an advantage over its much bigger competition.

The company was founded in 2004, when Kasselmann decided he wanted to learn more about management and controlling a company's cash flow from both the revenue and expense sides. After 10 years at Frain Camins & Swartchild and seven at Studley, he choose to venture out on his own.

"I couldn't be mad at the corner office for making the wrong decision when the guy in the corner office is me," he says. "I also took an interest in smart buildings, green buildings and intelligent infrastructure and in 2004, when I started Op2mize, the mainstream brokerage business didn't seem to have an appetite for that."

Kasselmann started the business with partners who are no longer with the firm. Their spouses chose the company's name off of a short list created by the founders and based on strict criteria. Kasselmann didn't want the firm to be named after its founders, he wanted it to be one or two words that told a story and said what the company did. And it have to have a "tech edge." Ultimately, Op2mize had all of those qualities and the associated domain name was still available. In the aftermath of the dotcom bust, Kasselmann has turned down several offers to buy the firm's unique name.

Op2mize also has a unique approach to business. Instead of focusing only on the transactional side, the firm does consulting to help its clients keep costs down and efficiency up in their buildings.

"We like the consulting because, while it's more modest, it's also more steady. It helps us afford an increasing cost of existence or overhead," Kasselmann says. "It gives us ability to niche or differentiate ourselves. Chicago is filled with terrific, more than capable brokers or brokerages. Just to be at the same level would put us at a competitive disadvantage. We've got to have a point of distinction."

That point of distinction led to Op2mize's banner year for transactional success in 2008. The consulting business was also steady, as Kasselmann spent the early part of 2008 helping a sales company set up its employees with work-from-home technologies that allowed the company to operate without any of its 14 regional sales centers. Between the costs of rent, utilities and furniture, coupled with increased connectivity and flexibility, Kasselmann saved the company \$500,000 a year.

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"It was great, but it was challenging because we had to work with the company's IT department so that we could make sure there was a supportable hardware and software package as well as reimbursement for home internet and mobile connectivity. We want them to be able to be productive wherever they go but the idea is to untether them from the office and get their salespeople out into the field more often." Kasselmann says "I'm interested to see if their sales productivity has increased, I don't know if it did but I would bet it has."

The company is not only growing in terms of clientele but also personnel. Kasselmann is adding an administrative staffer three days a week and is in the process of hiring three new brokers for the company, tripling its size from 2008. He's already very impressed with Daniel Dakhil, who has worked as Op2mize's manager of client services for almost a year. Dakhil is learning a lot from his job and is happy with the vast opportunity Op2mize offers him.

"I'm getting so much opportunity to learn. I want to absorb everything like a sponge," he says. "It's very cutting edge and gives me an advantage in my career to have worked for a small shop like this."

Clients are also pleased with Kasselmann's business acumen. He's come a long way from his first job as an industrial broker with Frain Camins & Swartchild, but he still does traditional business, just with his own edge, says Dan Schoenheider, vice president and city manager with Liberty Property Trust, who enlists Kasselmann's help with brokerage services.

"He's very creative and a very smart real estate professional," Schoenheider says. "He approaches things from a different perspective."

In 2009, Kasselmann plans to continue to grow his business through strategic partnerships as well as possibly acquiring properties to own and improve using his "sustainable intelligence" approach. While the firm has a lot in its brokerage pipeline, Kasselmann thinks more of its money will come from those two initiatives as well as consulting in the coming year.

"We think it's going to be a great time to acquire assets and employ our own revenue strategy," he says. "We think that will be true in 2010 and beyond but it's also part of our survival strategy now."

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